CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TEACHING OF THEOLOGY

Introduction

According to the old hierarchy, continuing long into the seventeenth century, the liberal arts, medicine and law were all inferior to theology. The necessity of theological education had been the argument par excellence for the establishment of universities. Remote and peripheral regions and cities, in particular, made the argument that their preachers should be educated to serve in their own region. This argument was less forceful in advocating the establishment of athenaeums.1 Even though many illustrious schools emphasised the necessity of cultivating the art of preaching, this did not apply to the foundation of such schools in Amsterdam (1632), Dordrecht (1636), Nijmegen (1655; from 1656 till the 1670s a university) and Zutphen (1686).2 Apparently, the old hierarchy appealed less to this new type of school. Among these illustrious schools, that of Amsterdam survived longest and stands out as the best known in the Republic.

Theology was not the first subject to be taught at the Athenaeum, but one of the last. This is particularly odd, as there was a great deal of documented interest in theology in Amsterdam. Not a single source offers any explanation for this peculiar circumstance. Like other Dutch cities, Amsterdam annually granted a number of scholarships to local boys, usually the sons of preachers. They were lodged at the States College in Leiden. In 1599 Amsterdam began to grant up to five annual scholarships to support the preachers-to-be, and required them to find employment in Amsterdam after completing their education.3 The city ended up with only one preacher a year, a rather small number

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1 Van Miert, ‘The Reformed Church and Academic Education’, passim.
2 According to Frijhoff, ‘Zeelands universiteit’, 8, it is in general true that ‘nearly all institutes of higher learning in the northern Netherlands, both universities and illustrious schools, were initially set up as theological seminaries.’ This statement seems a little too strong.
3 Otterspeer, Groepsportret 1, 153.
if one considers its size. In fact, a simple calculation proves that the City Council could have used the money more economically if it had financed the appointment of a professor of theology instead. Perhaps the Leiden States College was thought to provide a better education than one professor of theology at home could have given.

The most plausible explanation of the omission of theology is found in the Remonstrant character of the religious network in and around the Athenaeum, which gave rise to a tension between the Reformed classis of Amsterdam and the greater part of the magistracy. Barlaeus was dismissed from his chair at Leiden University in 1619 because of his Remonstrant inclinations; Vossius was accused of the same ideas; the Remonstrant exile Corvinus and the Copernican printer and mathematician Blaeu could privately teach their students who were part of the network of Vossius and Barlaeus in peace, because some regents were Remonstrants themselves. The Remonstrant Seminary could never replace a seminary of the public church, but it would have been able to compete with it successfully.

Moreover, in the period 1627–1631 the supporters of tolerance won the majority in the Amsterdam city council. After the great debate on tolerance in the late twenties, and the commotion in the city which eventually led to the exile of an orthodox preacher, for the next two decades power fell to the Bicker family and their supporters, a faction known as the ‘Bickerian league’. The church authorities showed an ongoing frustration about the ‘latitudinarian’ attitude of the City Council. In this situation, an affirmation of orthodoxy by the appointment of a theology professor would not have been advantageous to the regents.

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4 *RBOB* shows that in the period 1603–1698 a total of 121 alumni were given financial support. In the Veluwe Quarter 131 grants were provided in the period 1590–1671. See Evers, ‘Het Veluws beurzenstelsel’, 54–64 for an analysis of the results of this grant system.

5 The scholarship students usually received between one and two hundred guilders a year. In addition, extra study and travel expenses were occasionally reimbursed. Some young people received financial backing while still at school or waiting for a vacancy at the College. The city government paid an average of thousand guilders per annum to support its future pastors—enough to pay for a professor of theology.


8 Van Eeghen, ‘De eerste jaren’, 14. Evenhuis, *Amsterdam I*, 320–321, deals with the relation between city and church under the telling heading ‘The consistory under the yoke’. In early 1636 the consistory twice resolved to attempt a condemnation of